INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTER FOR EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE, HELSINKI, 3-5 JUNE 1991

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI), with the support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, sponsored an International Encounter for European Journalists on the Question of Palestine, held at Helsinki, Finland, from 3 to 5 June 1991. The Encounter explored the prospects for an international peace conference on the Middle East.

The Encounter was moderated by the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Security Council Affairs, Vasiliy Safronchuk, and coordinated by Mustapha Tlili, Chief of the Anti-Apartheid, Decolonization and Palestine Programmes Section of DPI. It was part of DPI's special information programme on the question of Palestine, mandated by General Assembly resolutions 44/41 C of 6 December 1989 and 45/67 C of 6 December 1990. The programme includes national and regional journalists' encounters and stems from the Assembly's conviction that the world-wide dissemination of accurate and comprehensive information on the question of Palestine remains of vital importance in heightening awareness of and support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian State.

The topic of the Encounter was selected in the light of General Assembly resolution 45/68 of 6 December 1990, in which the Assembly "calls once again for the convening of an International Peace Conference on the Middle East, under the auspices of the United Nations, with the participation of all parties to the conflict, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, on an equal footing, and the five permanent members of the Security Council . . .".

The objective of the Encounter was to promote, on the issue of an international peace conference, a candid exchange of views between policy makers and analysts from the parties concerned on the one hand, and senior representatives of the media from all European countries and Israel, as well as the Palestinian press, on the other hand.

The structure of the Encounter was informal, with each panellist giving brief opening remarks, followed by open dialogue with the media representatives.

PARTICIPANTS

Panellists

There were nine panellists: Yasir Abedrabbo, member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Bir Zeit University, Ramallah, West Bank; Haim Ramon, Member of the Israeli Knesset, Labour Party; Elazar Granot, Chairman, United Workers Party, Israel; Fuchang Yang, Deputy Foreign Minister of China; Simon James Fraser, Middle East Policy Planner, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom; Anatoly Ivanovich Philyov, First Deputy Head, Directorate for the Middle East and North Africa, Soviet Union; William Quandt, Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., United States; and Mohamed El-Shafei Abdel Hamid, Former Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt.

Media

There were sixty-two media participants, including columnists, senior editors and editorial writers. They represented the following news organizations:

Zeri I Populit (Albania); *Die Presse* (Austria); *De Standaard, Le Soir* (Belgium); *Demokratzia, Duma* (Bulgaria); Xinhua (China); CTK, *Národná Obroda, Reflexe* (Czechoslovakia); *Information, Politiken* (Denmark); *Helsingen Sanomat, Hufvudstadsbladet, Oy Gig Films Ab, Uusi Suomi* (Finland); *Le Monde* (France); *Berliner Zeitung,*

Westdeutscher Rundfunk (Germany); *Messimvrini, Ta Nea* (Greece); Hungarian Radio, *Nepszabadsag* (Hungary); *Morgunbladid* (Iceland); *The Irish Times, The Sunday Independent* (Ireland); *Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica* (Italy); *Ha'aretz, Davar, New Outlook* (Israel); *Al-Fajr* (Jerusalem); *Luxemburger Wort* (Luxembourg); *The Sunday Times of Malta* (Malta); *Elsevier, Trouw* (Netherlands); NRK (Norway); Palestine News Agency—"WAFA" (PLO); *Gazeta Wyborcza, Polityka* (Poland); *Expresso, Público* (Portugal); AZI, *România Libera* (Romania); *El Mundo, El País,* TVE (Spain); *Svenska Dagbladet* (Sweden); *La Tribune de Genève, 24 Heures* (Switzerland); *Cumhuriyet, Milliyet* (Turkey); *Izvestia, Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* Novosti, *Novoye Vremya* (USSR); *The Guardian, The Times* (UK); *Borba, Nedjelja, Oslobodjenje* (Yugoslavia).

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

3 June 1991

The Encounter generated a full and candid discussion of the dynamics and possibilities of a Palestinian/Israeli peace process.

Participants were welcomed by Finnish Acting State Secretary a.i. Mauri Eggert, who averred that the best possibilities for the Finnish contribution lay in peace-keeping and, if possible, peacemaking.

Opening remarks on the United Nations perspective were provided by Vasiliy Safronchuk, who pointed out that the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Palestinian question at its core, constituted a threat to world peace, and therefore directly pointed the way to United Nations involvement in the issue.

PLO panellist Yasir Abedrabbo insisted that Palestinians were "ready at any time, in any place, bilaterally or multilaterally, to sit" with representatives of the Israeli Government. This was new information, according to Haim Ramon, co-panellist and prominent opposition member of the Israeli Knesset. Mr. Ramon also asserted that direct negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis could indeed lead to an independent Palestinian State, but that such an outcome could not be prejudged.

Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi, one of the West Bank leaders who had recently met with US Secretary of State James Baker, maintained that one could not embark upon a conference without a "roadmap"—defined routes, stated goals. In her opinion, only United Nations participation could ensure a peace process with definition and limits.

Israeli panellist Elazar Granot said that whatever the form the peace process took, it must be based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), and arrive at an accord in which both sides traded "land for land and peace for peace"; both sides needed to accept territorial compromise, both equally needed the benefits of peace.

Both the Chinese and Egyptian panellists drew from their national experiences in offering their insights on the peace process. Fuchang Yang expressed the belief that his country's determination to negotiate once-bitter issues with both the USSR and Japan showed that only the will to resolve strong differences face to face could result in peace. Quoting a Chinese proverb cited by the late Premier Zhou Enlai in reference to the Middle East issue in 1955, he said: "It is better to make friends than to make enemies".

Mohamed El-Shafei Abdel Hamid—drawing upon the experience of the Camp David negotiations—insisted that set, recognized goals were necessary to any useful peace process. One could not walk blindly into talks; pre-set guidelines were critical to any successful outcome.

4 June 1991

Day two of the Encounter was devoted to the European Perspective, although early morning discussions veered onto the heated issues of occupation, settlements, random violence and the *intifadah*, with both panellists and media participants taking part in the debate.

The debate was lively, with some panellists defending the right of a people under occupation

to resist, and noting that the Palestinian leadership claimed no control over, or responsibility for, violent acts such as indiscriminate knifings. Other participants and panellists focused on the issue of settlements, which proved equally divisive.

United Kingdom panellist Simon Fraser steered the dialogue to the role of Europe in the peace process, and in his unofficial opening statement, he set out the position of the European Community (EC) on holding an international peace conference. He suggested that although US and European interests in the Middle East might not always be identical, due in some measure to Europe's physical propinquity to the region, Europe should nevertheless evolve ways of playing a complementary role in the peace process. Although the US was the only nation capable of exerting a direct influence on all parties in the region and protecting Western interests, the EC and the Mediterranean rim countries found, primarily through growing economic relationships, that new ties and areas of mutual interest should allow Europe to exert a constructive influence on both Israel and the Arab States. Dr. Mikhail-Ashrawi said that Europe was needed to buttress the peace process, provide options and serve as a testing ground for innovative thinking. Europe, in fact, could explore new ideas which might not emerge so readily in the American political context.

Mr. Ramon downplayed European influence, stating that to play a real role Europe must supply either money or weapons to the regional players. Other participants, from the media, pointed out that the European nations taken as a whole already met those criteria, and that with the advent of 1992, European economic contributions to the Middle East could be formidable.

5 June 1991

The conclusion of the Encounter provided the participants not only with a review of the proceedings by US and Soviet panellists William Quandt and Anatoly Philyov, but with an analysis of what the near future could hold for the prospects for a peace conference on the Middle East. Dr. Quandt asserted that although it appeared that President George Bush might be readying himself for direct involvement, the current process being undertaken by the US was subject to a limited timeframe. He said the need for third-party involvement in the peace process was clear, and that the third party must necessarily be the US, with support from the United Nations and Europe, as Palestinians and Israelis could not by themselves at this point bring themselves to the negotiating table.

For his part, Ambassador Philyov stressed that the Soviet Union had always fully supported UN resolutions on the question of Palestine, and that the current peace undertaking had become in fact a joint affair ever since Mr. Baker's meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh on 24 April of this year. Israeli panellist Granot agreed with the Soviet panellist in emphasizing that the Soviet role in the Middle East remained vital to all parties in the region.

To repeated questions from media participants as to what would happen if or when the ''US initiative'' failed, Mr. Safronchuk pointed out that the Security Council took seriously its responsibility for the current efforts—''the ball will remain in play''—and that the Secretary-General attached great importance to the current endeavours, and had every intention of maintaining an active UN role.

On behalf of the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI), Mustapha Tlili, Coordinator and Secretary of the Encounter, summed up the mood of the participants when he expressed the hope that these three days of discussions had made a tangible contribution to the ongoing peace process and the international community's efforts to open new avenues to a peace conference on the question of Palestine. He concluded his remarks with the thought that should the Israeli Government express interest in the idea, the United Nations Department of Public Information would be pleased to consider holding a similar encounter in any suitable city in Israel, with the participation of the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, and officials of the Government of Israel.

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